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## **Social Media for International Students: It's Not All About Facebook**

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# **SOCIAL MEDIA FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS – IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT FACEBOOK**

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## **Abstract**

According to the OECD there are nearly four million tertiary students enrolled in a course outside their country of citizenship. In 2010 there were 335 273 international students enrolled in higher education in Australia. To support these students during their study, libraries need to find ways to communicate and engage with them.

An Australian study found that international students’ preferred methods for learning about library services was through library webpages and personal contact with library staff. As more libraries experiment with social networking to inform and connect with students, we need to determine the effectiveness of this strategy for reaching international students.

Junco (2011) conducted a study into the effects of Facebook usage on students’ grades and found that students who used Facebook for social activities had lower GPA’s than students who used Facebook for information collection and sharing activities. Junco’s distinction between social activities and information dissemination activities on Facebook indicate that social networking sites aren’t necessarily all about being “social” anymore. Junco’s study indicates that libraries should not fear “invading students’ space” as gathering and distributing information makes up a major part of activities conducted on Facebook.

Libraries need to identify what social networking sites international students prefer. Librarians must then decide if there is value in using these sites to collect and share information with their students. The paper will address three questions:

1. What social networking sites do international students prefer and why?
2. Which sites do they use to socialise and which do they use to gather and distribute information?
3. How can libraries leverage this information to enhance the international student experience?

Discovering which social networking sites international students prefer for information dissemination activities will allow libraries to target appropriate communication channels for engaging these students.

**Keywords:** Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, social media, social networking, libraries, library, international students, internationalisation, internationalization, library services, library communication, Bond University,

## **Introduction**

International students make a significant contribution to higher education in Australia both in terms of the direct economic benefits and the less tangible advantages such as the internationalisation of the experience for all students studying at these institutions. While almost one third of students enrolled in higher education in Australia are international, the numbers are declining at an alarming rate and universities are paying far greater attention to improving the support offered to international students in a bid to enhance their experience and attract new recruits.

As a key service in Australian universities, libraries have an important role in providing a wide range of support services for international students. From students' earliest contacts with the university as they commence their studies and throughout their study programs, libraries have a vital role in assisting international students to adjust to their new environment, build their awareness and knowledge of the resources and services available and develop the information skills essential to their ability to become lifelong learners. Australian university libraries also provide a central, collaborative, technology enabled learning hub where students can meet, interact and learn individually and with others. Through their physical spaces, through their staff and through a host of other media, libraries are reaching out to engage and support international students. Increasingly, libraries are using digital media such as websites, online tutorials and most recently, social networking, to communicate and share information with students, both domestic and international.

Bond University, based on the Gold Coast in Queensland has traditionally attracted an enrolment of international students that is proportionally high by Australian standards. Although the overall student numbers are not large (4,407 currently), the University's population of international students has varied between 48% in 2005 and 32% in 2012. To improve communication and engagement with international students, librarians have experimented with social networks such as blogs and Facebook. This paper will focus on a research project undertaken by librarians at Bond University to investigate the social networking sites preferred by international students. It presents the results of a survey of 575 international and domestic students which was designed to address the following three questions:

1. What social networking sites do international students prefer?
2. Which sites do they use to socialise and which do they use to gather and distribute information?
3. How can libraries leverage this information to enhance the international student experience?

Based on the results of the survey, suggestions are made on social networking strategies to improve support for international students.

## **Literature Review**

This review considered previous relevant research, covering:

- The role of the internet and social networking in assisting with international student assimilation
- The role of libraries, library resources and librarians in supporting international students.

## **Role of the internet and social networking in support for international students**

Kim, Yum & Yoon (2009) found those international students who used the Internet during their study were able to use it to build new relationships with students of the same ethnicity in their host country. Furthermore, students also used these technologies to build new relationships with students from their host country. However rather than focusing on building and maintaining relationships, students' primary goal was to meet academic requirements. This research focused on Internet use as a whole; however it would have been interesting to discover whether particular applications or social networking use specifically contributed to the findings of this research.

Lin et al. (2011) conducted a study focusing primarily on the outcomes of Facebook use during international students' study in the USA. The researchers found that Facebook usage contributed to students' ability to participate socially and culturally in their new surroundings. Those students who interacted with their U.S. friends on Facebook were better socially adjusted. Lin et al. (2011) found that out of the international students surveyed, 46% of students indicated a social networking site **other** than Facebook was their primary account.

DeAndrea et al. (2002) discovered the social support gained through social networking use allowed new students to successfully adjust to academic study. In addition to this finding Junco, Heiberger and Loken (2011) found that Twitter use which when encouraged for academic discussion had a positive effect on students' grades, engagement and motivation. It was also noted that students' and academics' use of social networking to connect and contact each other was particularly "congruent with their digital lifestyles" (p. 128), meaning both faculty and students are continually online and social networking allows them to connect in a familiar environment. This environment allows for the possibility of students who feel uncomfortable participating in the traditional classroom with the opportunity to interact and connect with students and faculty in a different form.

Research indicates that particular features on the social networking sites will encourage different types of engagement. This was evident in the findings of Valenzuela, Park and Kee's (2009) study where Facebook Groups allowed students to do civic and political engagement, suggesting that rather than using social networking sites for social participation, students are using these sites for public participation. This concept is supported by Junco's (2012b) where it was found that students use Facebook for reasons other than to socialise. Information sharing and information collecting activities make up a proportion of time spent on Facebook for students. Those students who use Facebook more for information sharing and collecting activities had higher grades than those who used it more for socialising (Junco, 2012b). This evidence suggests students are using Facebook for educational activities whether it is encouraged or not as in Junco, Heiberger and Lunken's 2011 study.

### **The role of libraries, library resources and librarians in supporting international students**

It has been reported that international students were lacking knowledge or had misconceptions about the role of their host country's academic library (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001; Hughes, 2010; Knight, Hight & Polfer, 2010). Their previous experience with academic libraries often differed significantly from those in their host country. Hughes (2010) found those students experienced libraries as textbook repositories or thought the collection was out-dated. Although some students came to study in Australia with little experience and knowledge of the academic library, Hughes (2010) found that their competency grew throughout the duration of their stay. This lack of awareness and knowledge of the academic library in their host country indicates that international students need better communication from the library. Libraries need to find ways to improve how they assist international students to build their competency at using the online and physical library.

Research also found students were unaware of the role of the librarian in the academic library. In particular students did not know librarians were available for providing research support (Hughes, 2010; Liu & Winn, 2009). This could be due to students not often approaching library staff for assistance or anxiety about doing so (Knight, Hight & Polfer, 2010; Mehra & Bilal, 2007). However, students did state they wanted contact with the library. Students reported email was their preferred method of contact, and when learning about using library resources having the option to complete an online tutorial was preferred (Sackers, Secomb & Hulett, 2008). These findings suggest students are quite comfortable with self-directed learning online and communication through email.

This theme of technology preferences continues in further research. Students feel comfortable with using the library's online resources although they have limited information literacy. Students were often described as being technologically fluent, with a high ability for using the Internet (Hughes, 2005; Knight, Hight & Polfer, 2010; Liu & Winn, 2009; Mehra & Bilal, 2007). However, few of the students in Hughes' (2010) research had experience using library databases, one particular student cited that their library did not provide any access to electronic

resources. Although students do have high technical abilities the evidence suggests they still need assistance when it comes to using library online resources.

## **Methodology**

Anecdotal reports from lecturers at Bond University suggested that students from some countries, particularly China, were preferring sites other than Facebook. A small study conducted by a group of Bond students in 2011 asked current and prospective students, predominantly from the Middle East, about social networking preferences and YouTube was highlighted as the most popular.

In order to further investigate international students' social media preferences, librarians at Bond decided to survey the current student body to ask them about their social networking choices and usage. The research was approved by the Bond University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement.

The survey questions were derived from various sources of information, including surveys on similar topics which had been published online, Wikipedia for a list of relevant social networking sites, and other published works. Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)) was selected as the survey platform.

The survey was constructed, using branching wherever possible to present to students only the questions which were relevant to them based on their previous answers and identified cohort. The survey was tested on small groups of student volunteers, and some adjustments to questions made.

The survey was advertised via a global student email, the Library website, the Library and Computing Facebook page, and the digital signage on campus. After the first week, further links were provided via the Learning Management System (Blackboard) homepage, and the Bond University Student Association clubs and societies management system, BondSync. Respondents were offered the opportunity to enter a draw to win one of five gift cards as an incentive.

The survey remained open for three weeks and 575 completed responses were gathered representing a response rate of 13%. The breakdown of domestic respondents (69%) and international respondents (31%) closely matches the student population which is currently 68% domestic and 32% international.

The data collected was exported and analysed using Microsoft Excel 2010.

## **Data analysis**

Data collection and analysis was divided into three sections:

- Demographics
- Social networking usage
- Education usage of social networking

## **Demographics**

The gender balance of respondents was heavily weighted towards females, at 68%. Seventy-six per cent of the survey respondents indicated they were under 25 years of age and the majority were in the range 20-24. Sixty-nine per cent of the respondents were domestic students while 31% were international. International students came from 39 different countries and 46% indicated their first language was not English. Of these, the most commonly spoken first language was Chinese or a Chinese dialect. The tables and charts below provide a visual presentation of the demographics of the survey respondents.











18-19	Male	
	Female	
20-24	Male	
	Female	
25-29	Male	
	Female	
30-39	Male	
	Female	
40 or older	Male	
	Female	

Table 1 Age categories by gender (1 figure represents 1%)

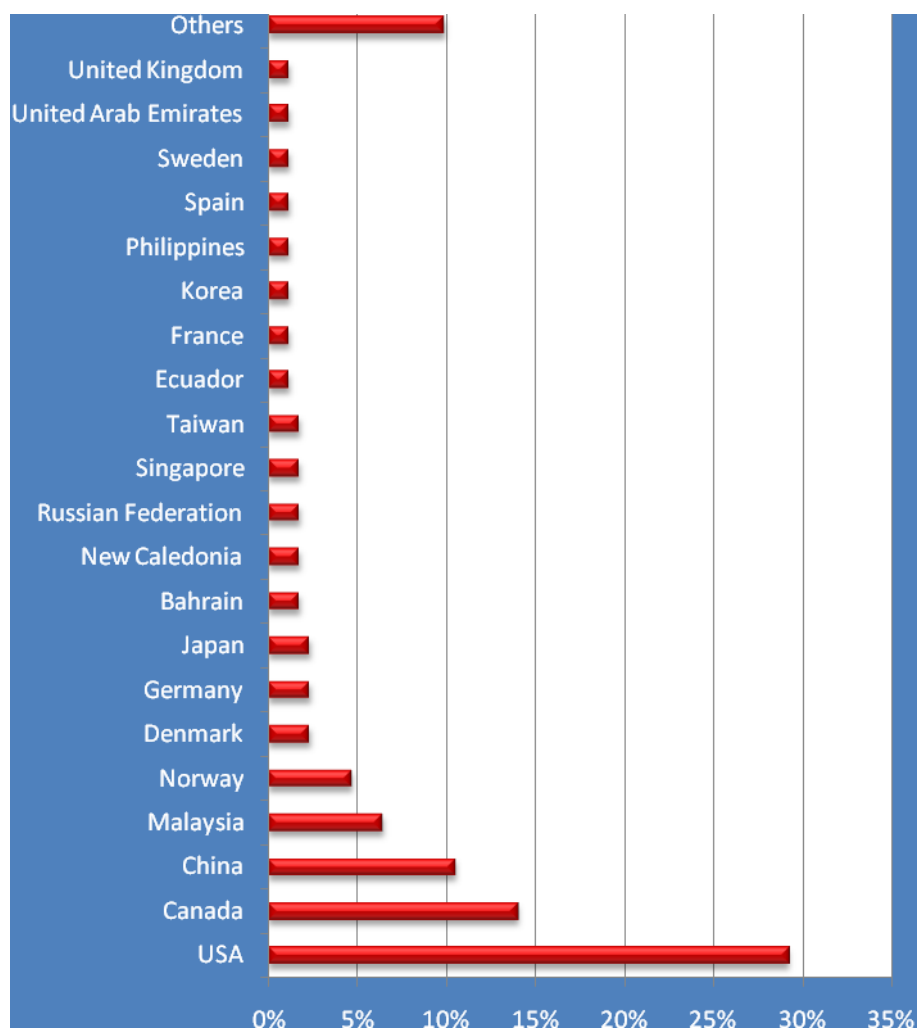
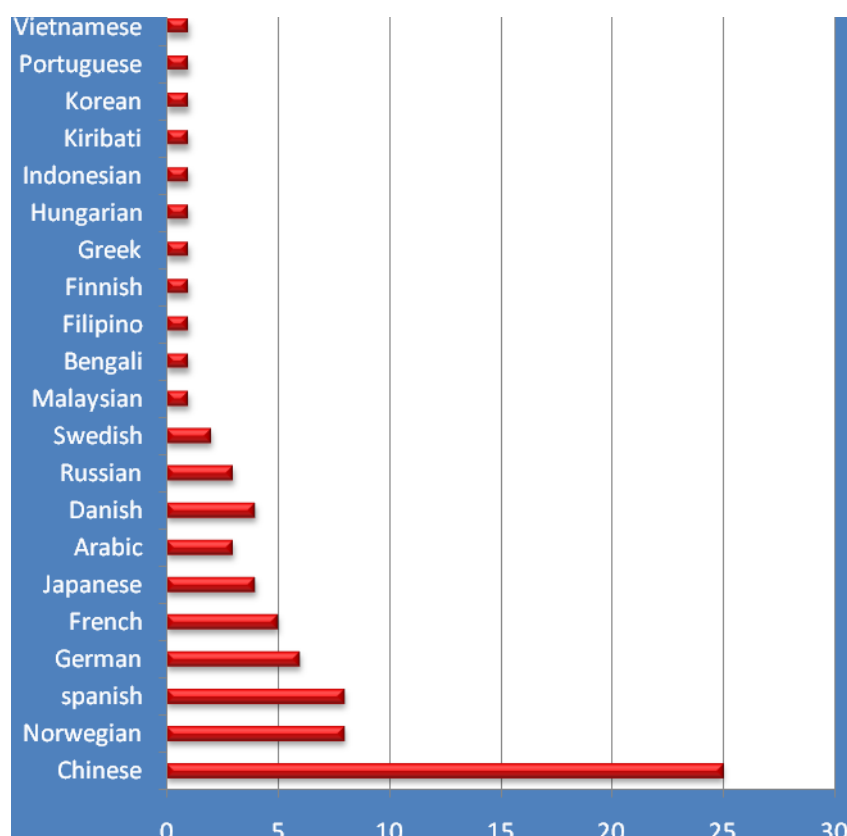


Figure1 Home country as selected by international respondents



**Figure 2 Number of respondents who nominated a language other than English as their first language**

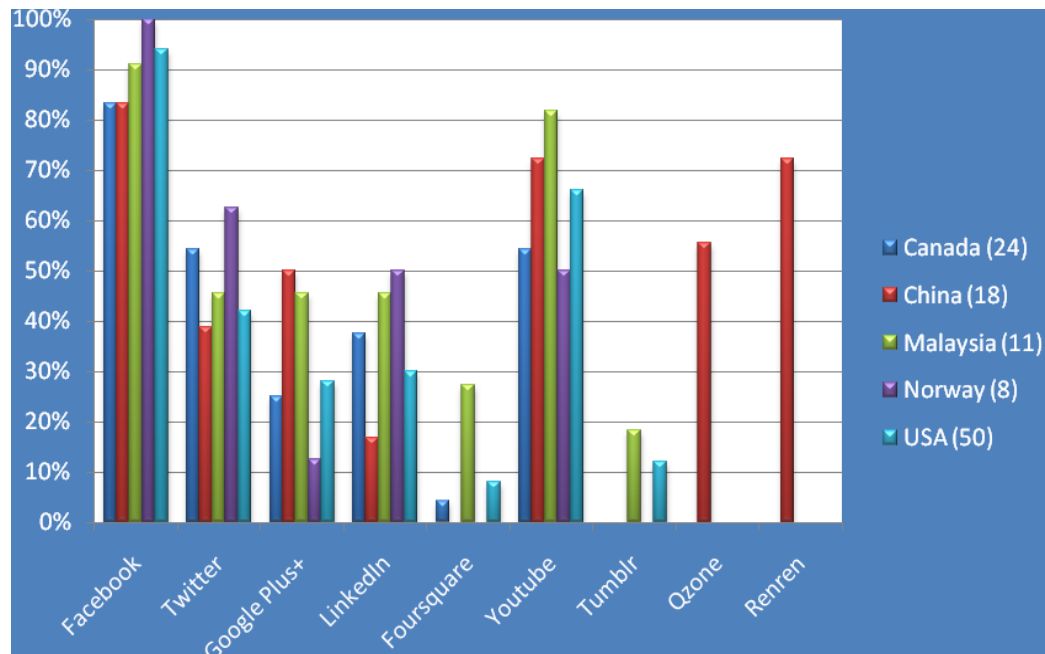
### Social networking usage

Students were asked to nominate from a list, the social networking platforms on which they had an account, and the length of time they had had the account. Facebook was the most popular for both domestic and international students, with 514 out of the 575 respondents indicating they had a Facebook account. Second most popular was YouTube, with 335 respondents indicating they had an account. Twitter was third with LinkedIn fourth. For domestic students Tumblr was a close fifth, while Google Plus was fifth for international students. Only those sites with more than 10 users are listed below.

	Domestic	International	Total
Facebook	362	152	514
YouTube	231	104	335
Twitter	104	70	174
LinkedIn	96	59	155
Google Plus+	69	56	125
Tumblr	82	14	96
Foursquare	20	12	32
MySpace	20	9	29
AOL	5	19	24
Renren	1	16	17
Qzone	2	12	14

**Table 2 Numbers of respondents with accounts**

The large number of countries represented and the small number of respondents from many of the countries meant that doing a complete analysis by country was not useful. Therefore the top five countries based on the highest number of respondents were chosen for more detailed analysis. Due to the variation in the numbers of respondents, percentages have been used so comparisons can be made between countries. The percentage is based on the number of respondents to each question from that country (shown in brackets).



**Figure 3 Percentage who nominated they have an account which they use, by country**

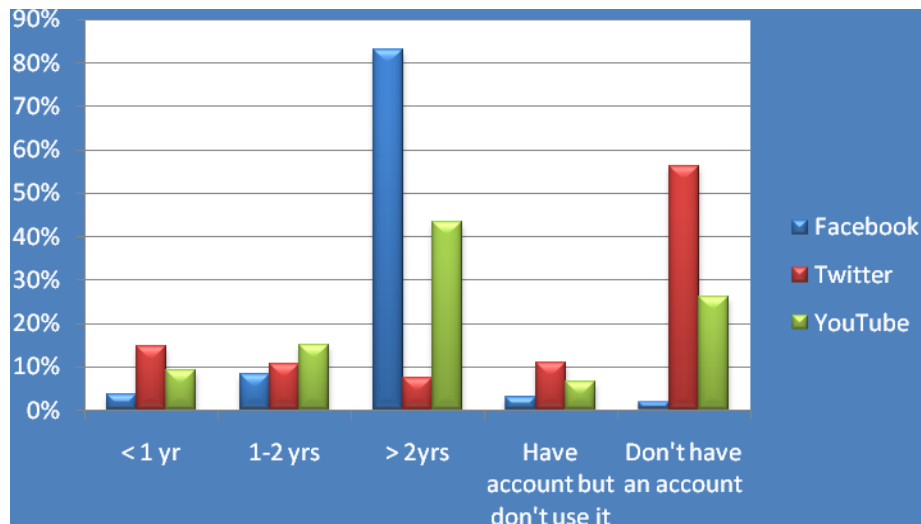
### Length of usage

More detailed analysis was carried out on the usage of the top three sites, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Respondents were asked to select one of the following options for each site.

< 1 yr	1-2 yrs	> 2yrs	Have account but don't use it	Don't have an account
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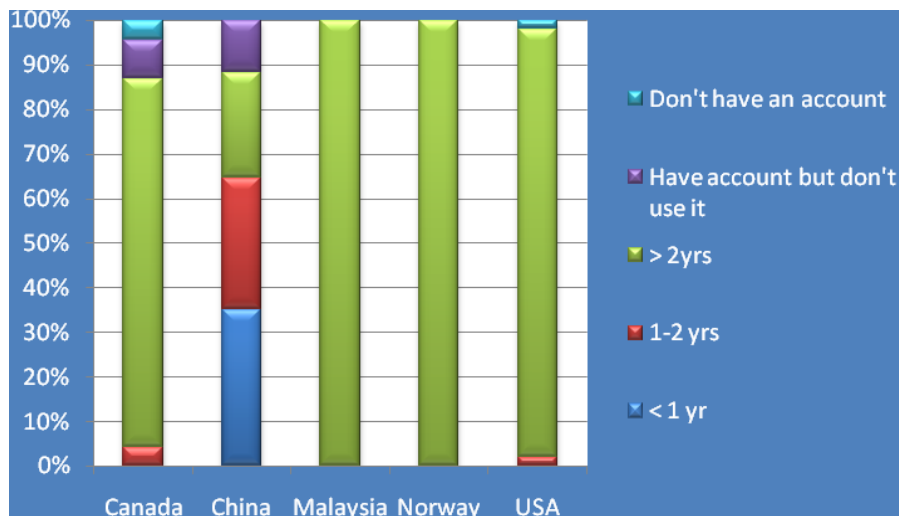
Figure 4 shows that most respondents have had a Facebook account for more than two years. By comparison, the majority of respondents don't have a Twitter account and those who do have accounts are more likely to have joined the site within the last two years. The usage of YouTube shows a pattern more similar to Facebook than Twitter. Although the usage is not as high as Facebook, the majority of users have had accounts for more than two years.





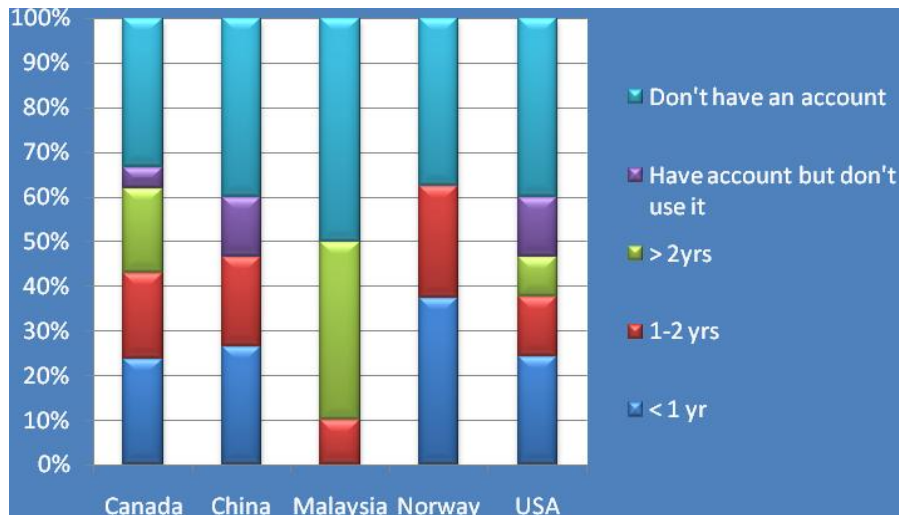
**Figure 4 Comparison of length of usage between Facebook, Twitter and YouTube**

Taking a more detailed look at the data for the selected specific countries in Figure 5, 64% of respondents from China indicated they have had their Facebook accounts less than 2 years. Although all respondents from China do have an account, 12% indicated they don't use it. A small percentage of students from Canada and USA don't have Facebook accounts, or have an account but don't use it.



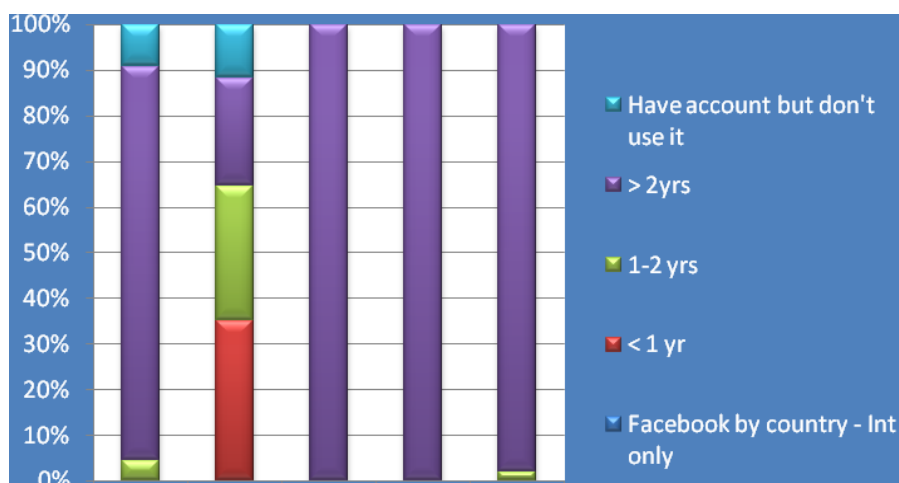
**Figure 5 Length of Facebook usage by country**

The pattern of length of usage is significantly different for Twitter as shown in Figure 6. In comparison to Facebook, a much greater percentage of all respondents from these countries don't have an account or no longer use it, and a greater percentage from all countries have had their Twitter accounts a shorter time.



**Figure 6 Length of Twitter usage by country**

The length of usage patterns for YouTube are different again for respondents from these selected countries, with 25% of respondents from China having had their account less than one year, but only 19% don't have an account, while 40% of those from Canada don't have an account.

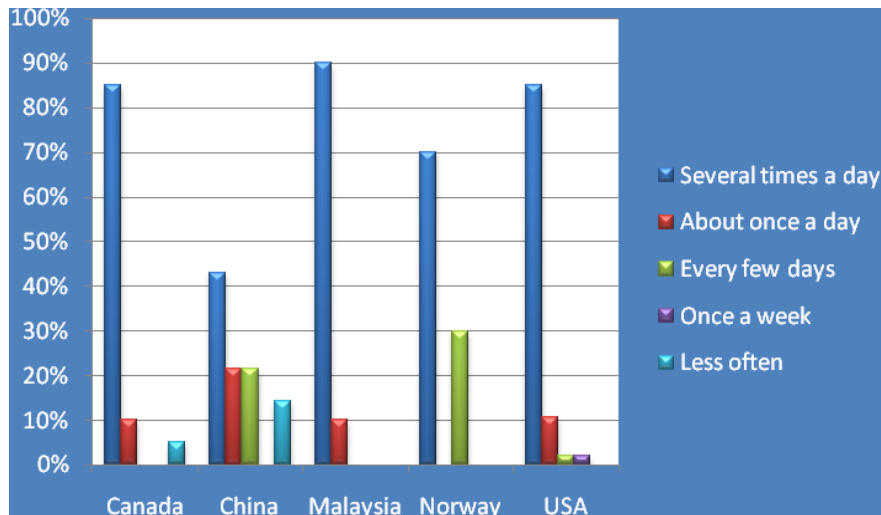


**Figure 7 Length of YouTube usage by country**

### Frequency of usage of Facebook

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they use their social networking sites.

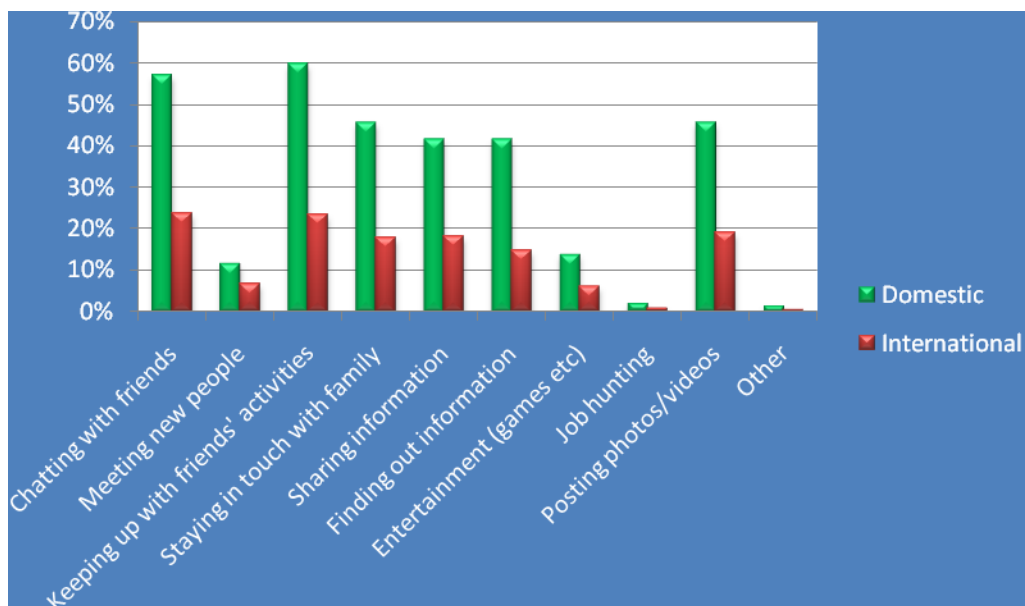
Figure 8 shows that while the majority of respondents from all countries are using Facebook several times a day, a much greater percentage from China use it less regularly.



**Figure 8 Frequency of usage of Facebook by students' home country**

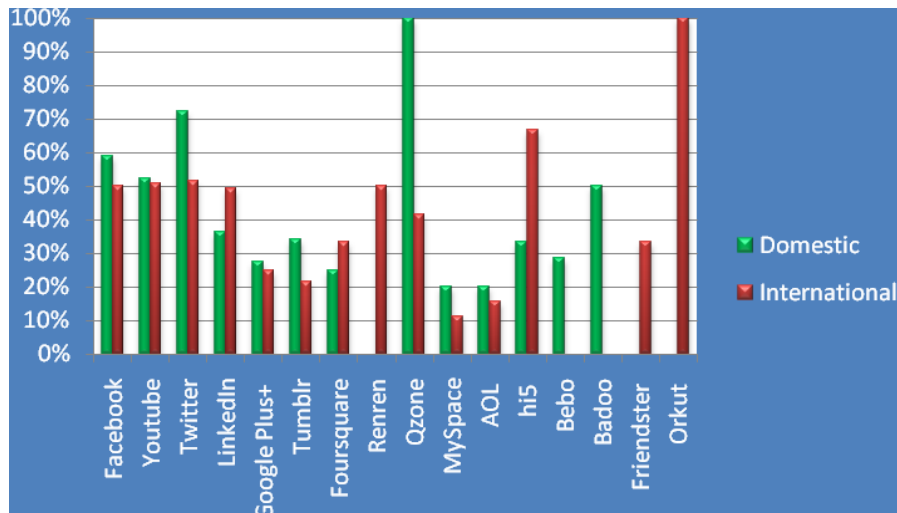
### Reasons for using social networking sites

Respondents were asked to select the reasons for using social networking sites from the provided list. The most commonly selected reasons were social activities (Chatting with friends, Keeping up with friends' activities and Staying in touch with family) but over 60% indicated they use Facebook for Sharing information and over 50% for Finding out information.



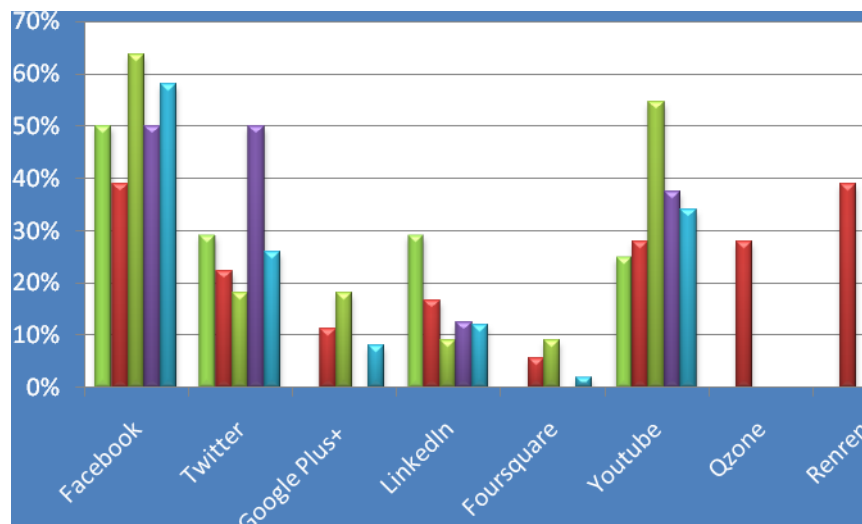
**Figure 9 Reasons for using Facebook**

As the use of social networking for finding information is of particular interest in this study, a more detailed analysis of the responses to which sites are used for finding information was conducted. Figure 10 shows the percentage of total respondents who use each site for finding information using that site.



**Figure 10** Percentage of site users using that site for finding information

Figure 11 shows the percentage of total respondents from the selected countries who indicated they use this site for finding information. Only sites where some entry was above 10% are included.



**Figure 11** Sites used for finding information by students' home country

Facebook is used for finding information by respondents from all countries. Sixty-four per cent of respondents from Malaysia indicate they use it for this purpose, while only 39% of respondents from China do so. Twitter is used as much as Facebook for finding information by respondents from Norway, while less than 30% of respondents from Canada, China, Malaysia and USA use Twitter for finding information. Respondents from all countries indicate they use YouTube for finding information, with over 50% from Malaysia (highest) and Canada and China the lowest at 25% and 28% respectively.

Of particular interest is the usage of Renren, at the same level as Facebook, for finding information by respondents from China. While not surprising, it does highlight the importance of not forgetting alternative platforms for reaching particular cohorts of international students.

## Favourite sites

Respondents were also asked to select their two favourite sites from the list provided, and to provide a reason why they were their favourite. The results are shown in Figure 12.

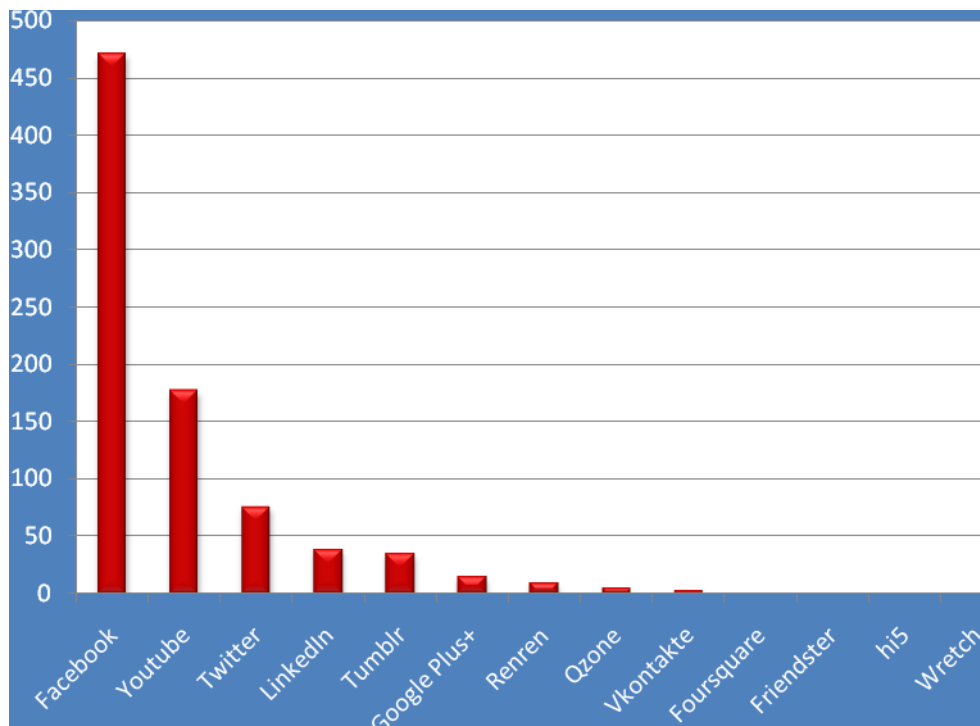


Figure 12 Favourite sites

Not surprisingly, the top three favourite sites were also the top three most heavily used.

The reasons for selecting these sites as favourites were analysed and categorised as social, useful and ease of use. The majority were social reasons in some way, such as:

- *All my friends are using these sites*
- *To keep in touch with friends overseas*
- *Get information on my friends*
- *There are so many people in these networks*
- *They bring two people closer and in an effective way*
- *Everyone has an account*
- *Most people around me use it, so I can get in touch with more people*

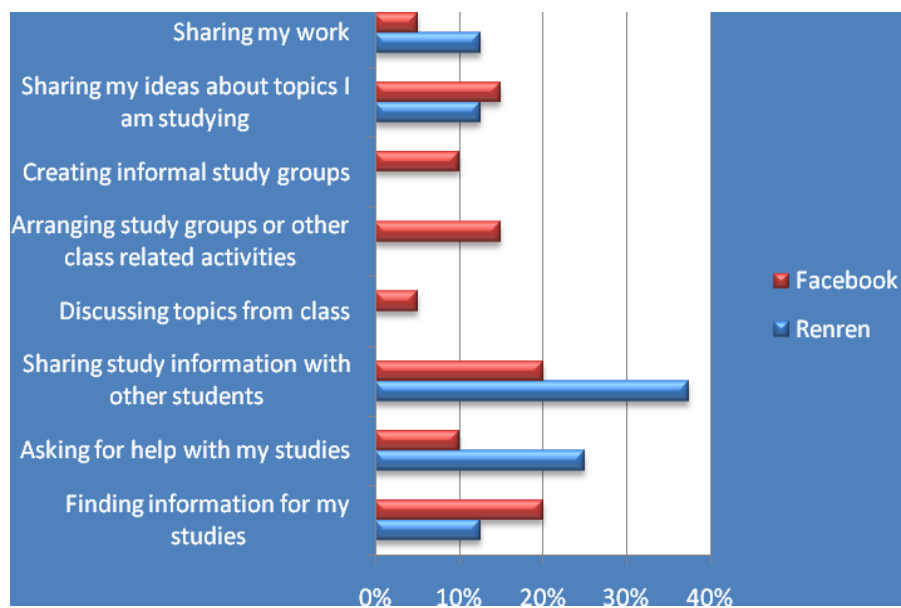
The next most common reason suggested ease of use. Other comments reflected the ease of access to information using these sites. Figure13 shows a wordle of the reasons given.



One of the comments in particular (below) identified the benefit to students of social networking, although not directly related to academic work.

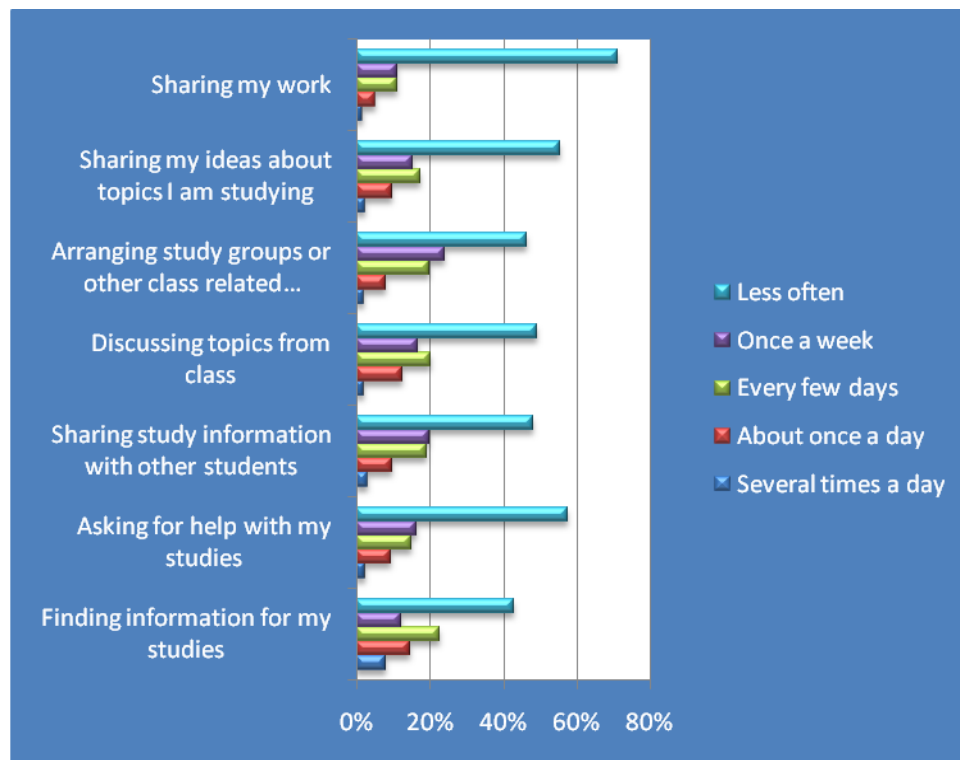
*It happens we share frustration about school through facebook [sic]. But never as a tool to enhance studying*

Although the total numbers were not high, it is interesting to compare the educational usage of Facebook and Renren by respondents from China. While activities that would normally involve students from many countries are done using Facebook, those where the respondent could choose to target other students from China saw a higher usage of Renren as shown in Figure 15. It is particularly interesting to note that when asking for help with their studies, these students are more than twice as likely to use Renren as Facebook.



**Figure 15 Comparison of educational usage between Facebook and Renren by respondents from China**

Respondents were asked to indicate how often they used social networking sites for the listed educational purposes. While the significant majority of all respondents indicated less than once a week, there were more than 10% of respondents using them much more frequently for the listed educational purposes.



**Figure 16 Frequency of use for educational purposes**

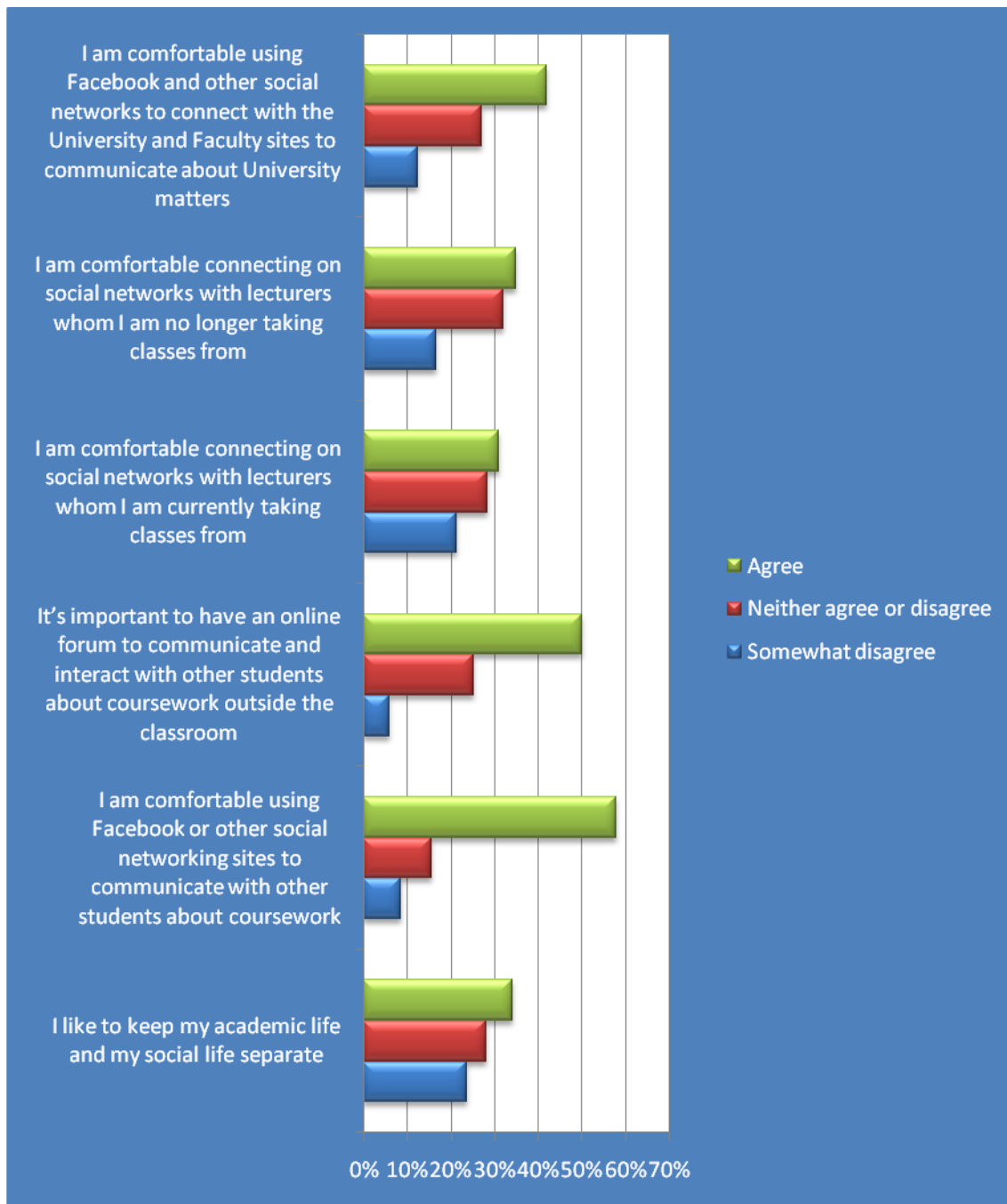
One respondent made their feelings about the question clear with the following response:

*Social Networking and class that is an oxy moron.*

Other comments ranged from *Never* to *Creating Project Groups to arrange meetings and share all work.*

As well as the reported usage of social networking sites for educational purposes, the researchers were interested in students' attitude to using these tools for communication with the University and its representatives. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements.





**Figure 17 Respondents attitude to using their social networking sites to communicate with the University**

## Discussion

The survey conducted as part of this research project has generated a wealth of data on social networking preferences and usage for both international and domestic students at Bond University. The analysis in the preceding section reveals important trends for international students in comparison with their domestic counterparts. The data has also captured a number of interesting trends relevant to all students' social networking usage. The evidence is summarised to help libraries and others in higher education select appropriate communication channels for engaging both international and domestic students.

In the context of the questions posed for this research project, **the social networking sites preferred by international students**, as an aggregate group, differ only marginally from domestic students. For example, the usage of the different social media sites for domestic and

international students was the same for first to fourth most popular (in order, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and LinkedIn). Facebook was used by 85% of international students and 91% of domestic students. This reflects the findings of the most recent ECAR National Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology which reported that 90% of students use Facebook (Dahlstrom, de Boor, Grunwald, and Vockley, 2011). Students from China were the only international group to exhibit a noticeable difference in their use of Renren (72%) and Qzone (56%).

Further analysis indicates some variances in length and frequency of usage between international students from different countries. Students from China were more recent comers to Facebook and YouTube while a large percentage from all countries have had their Twitter accounts a shorter time. The majority of students from all countries use Facebook several times a day although students from China use it less frequently than other international students.

The analysis of **students' motivations for using social media sites** reveals that the most common reasons for both international and domestic students were social activities (chatting with friends, keeping up with friends' activities and staying in touch with family) but more than half indicated they use Facebook for sharing and finding out information. Students are using the most popular social media sites (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) for finding information; however there are some variations in usage between students from different countries. For example, almost half the students from China use Renren as much as Facebook for finding information. Students from Norway use Facebook and Twitter equally for finding information; however students from most other countries use Twitter for finding information less frequently.

In terms of using social networking for educational purposes (such as sharing information about study topics, arranging study groups, asking for help with studies, etc.), Facebook and to a much lesser extent YouTube, were the preferred sites. Interestingly, for students from China, Renren was used predominantly when other students from China were involved, but where students from many countries were involved, Facebook was preferred for the gamut of educational purposes canvassed. Usage of social networking sites for educational purposes was much less frequent than usage for social activities.

Addressing the perennial question on the "personal/social" versus "professional/ institutional" use of social media sites, students indicated some ambivalence about their acceptance of the latter. Almost half were comfortable with connecting to University and Faculty social media sites, however about two thirds were either non-committal or disagreed with connecting to their lecturers' social networks and about a third agreed that they would like to keep their academic and social life separate.

The evidence strongly suggests that Facebook is currently the social networking site of preference for domestic students and the majority of international students. It is also the site used for the widest range of activities identified by Junco (2012a) as congruent with improved engagement and better academic outcomes.

Students' frequent use of YouTube to find information for educational purposes suggests that Libraries should be using the site to deliver information that students are seeking to assist them in their studies. This could include information skills training and information research techniques assistance, etc.

The usage of Twitter indicates that as a newer site, its popularity and use is still developing and it should be monitored as a potential medium for engagement and support.

For institutions with a large cohort of students from China, use of Renren and possibly QQZone should be monitored for potential as engagement sites.

As Junco (2012a) recommends, higher education staff have the opportunity to design support activities using Facebook, and other social networking sites, that will be beneficial to students' engagement and by extension, have a positive effect on their overall academic experience.

## Conclusion

"The library of the future will be a platform for participation and collaboration, with users increasingly sharing information among themselves as well as drawing on the library's resources." Leadbeater (2010, p. 195).

Social networking sites have undoubtedly become an integral part of the everyday life of the Net Generation. Our findings confirm that in addition to social activities, international and domestic students are connecting via social media for a wide range of educational purposes including group work and sharing and gathering information. While the information shared may be incomplete or even inaccurate, students are using social networking sites to validate ideas and make decisions.

The opportunity exists for librarians to join the 'conversation' and to impart information literacy skills via social media. For example, Facebook can be used to inspire discussions among relevant interest groups and for academic interaction and participation in a more personalised way. YouTube can be used to introduce new information, concepts and services at the point of need. Librarians can further tap into the opportunities afforded by using social networking tools to facilitate cross-program collaboration. This can be achieved by building community activities and integrating the communication tools in a way that best engage students as recommended by Wallace and Howard (2010).

To date, the majority of libraries that use social networking have used it as a marketing and promotional medium to push out information and announcements. Our survey results strongly suggest that libraries need to further exploit the strengths of different social networking sites. These are important platforms of participation and collaboration to disseminate information and facilitate engagement, and ultimately, build better relationships with students. Careful consideration of the purpose of the communication and engagement along with an understanding of which sites are most commonly used for which purposes will result in more targeted outcomes for different cohorts of students.

This research project has contributed to the growing body of evidence on how international and domestic students use social networking sites. It's definitely not all about Facebook! We can leverage this information to assist us think differently about how we offer core services, how we communicate with students, and how we interact with each other in this social future that is already upon us.

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